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AUTHOR Boehnlein, James
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ABSTRACT

By virtue of its interdisciplinary nature, the Humanities Base program at the University of Dayton encourages carefully designed composition instruction that reaches beyond the boundaries of traditional pedagogy. Because the Humanities Base themes are set in binary opposites--faith versus reason; autonomy versus responsibility; individual versus community, and humans versus nature-dialogic and conflictual experiences are natural points of departure for any composition exercise. James Berlin's article, "Poststructualism and Cultural Studies" (1993) offers a coherent, theoretical basis for the pedagogy employed in the courses in this program. Students in these classes select the topics of their essays, but they must do so within the context of larger Humanities themes and the binaries those themes represent. Responding, interacting, and composing--the tripartite elements of a social/epistemic rhetoric--provide a way of determining what it means to be human. (SAM)

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James Boehnlein, Ph.D.

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The Humanities Base Classroom: Responding, Interacting, and Composing

By virtue of its interdisciplinary nature, the Humanities Base program at the University of Dayton encourages carefully designed composition instruction which reaches beyond the boundaries of traditional pedagogy. Having taught English 114, the Freshman Writing Seminar, and English 102, College Composition II, as part of this year's pilot program, I have isolated three distinguishing characterisitics of both courses:

+ intertextuality: Remarque, Plato, Mark, and Jones;
+ interdisciplinarity: English, Philosophy, Religion, and History;
+ social-epistemic rhetoric as recently defined in James Berlin's article, "Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies."

These emerging standpoints of the pilot courses largely informed by approach to both composition courses. Pedagogically, these standpoints provided the theoretical bases for my classroom practices: responding, interacting, and composing.

Because the Humanities Base themes are set in binary opposites--faith v. reason, autonomy v. responsibility, individual v. community, and human beings v. nature--dialogic and conflictual classroom experiences are natural points of departure

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for any composition exercise. For example, the text for English 114, Rereading America, is designed to challenge many of the cultural assumptions which have created hegemonic attitudes in our country. The text, therefore, "provokes students to think and to write critically about complex issues emerging from myths that dominate American culture." The chapter, "The Myth of Progress," fit nicely with the Humanities Base theme, "Human Beings v. Nature." Likewise, "The Myth of Individual Opportunity" reinforced discussion about the "Individual v. Community." The English 102 text, Writing Arguments, employs the Toulmin model accompanied by a number of argumentative essays that touch upon Humanities Base themes. The section of the text, "Birth Control and the Schools: Should High Schools Dispense Contraceptives?" provided a lengthy discussion on the role of faith and reason as both influenced moral and ethical stands. By responding to these issues and themes, students in both English 114 and 102 began to see connections; their iNdividual responses to these readings supported classroom interaction.

As mentioned above, James Berlin's article, "Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies," offered a coherent, theoretical basis for the pedagogy employed in these pilot courses. Berlin argues that one should not view liberal humanism as some kind of "monolithic structure." He recommends that the rhetorical act, as shaped and refined by the Humanities Base themes, is instead "multiple and conflicted," composed of "numerous subject formations or positions." These insights were especially helpful because this social-epistemic rhetoric, as

opposed to a current-traditional rhetoric, creates a "multifocal climate that encourages negotiation rather than totalization." Berlin also avers that for contemporary rhetoric, the writer and reader, the speaker and listener, must likewise be aware that the subject of discourse is a "construction, a fabrication, established through the devices of signifying practices."

Thus, the Humanities Base themes brought with them strong social and cultural reinforcement, so that what we take to exist, to have value, and to be possible seem necessary, normal, and inevitable (Berlin 23) and render "alternatives unthinkable, in this way determining who can act and what can be accomplished."

For social-epistemic rhetoric, as Berlin suggests, "teaching is central, not an afterthought through which practice is made to conform with the more important work of theory" (25). This classroom is dialogic, situating learning within the realities of the students' own experience, particularly their experiences as informed by the Humanities Base binary opposites. Again, as Berlin argues, the dialogic classroom is designed to encourage students "to become transformative intellectuals in their own right" (26). Our larger purpose is to encourage students to negotiate these binary opposites, as inscribed in the various texts, in order to bring about more democratic and personally humane ideological arrangements (Berlin 26-27).

Thus, the students in these classes select the topic and the content of their essays, but they must do so within the context of the larger Humanities themes. In Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, students must choose some feature of the text

which reinforces the Humanities Base themes. This unit worked especially well as each of the four binary opposites found expression in Remarque's text and, therefore, lent themselves well to class discussion and composition.

Finally, as Berlin notes, in enacting the composing process, students are learning to understand personal and social experience involve acts of discourse production and interpretation, the two acting reciprically in reading and writing codes. Thus, responding, interacting, and composing--the tripartite elements of a social-epistemic rhetoric--provide a way of determining what it means to be human.

Work Cited

Berlin, James A. "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice." Rhetoric Review. 2 (1) 1993: 16-33.